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Reagan Has Pulled U.S. Back to the Center

By GEOFFREY KEMP

In the weeks preceding the ouster of Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos, the American foreign-policy community put on a rare display of bipartisan consensus.

Congress members, editorial writers and specialists of all persuasions united in their support for the overall thrust of the Administration's policy. This did not come as a surprise. Since the 1984 election, both political parties have been moving toward the center on foreign and defense questions, suggesting that the divisiveness created by the Vietnam War may be behind us.

Consider the evidence. In the past year a Republican Administration has imposed limited sanctions against South Africa, approved military sales to China, helped orchestrate the removal of Haitian dictator Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier, engaged in a serious and conciliatory summit meeting with the Soviets and renewed arms-control negotiations with them, remained a strong supporter of free trade and showed great restraint in the use of military force to counter terrorism. These are the actions not of ideologues but of conservative pragmatists whose behavior is reminiscent of the Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy administrations.

The Democrats, too, have shifted their center of gravity. Most significant has been a new public posture on national-security matters. While the size of the Pentagon budget and the performance of Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger remain targets for attack, Democratic wrath has focused on mismanagement, fraud and abuse rather than on the military establishment itself.

Only the most liberal of liberals call for more social programs at the expense of defense. In a similar vein the CIA and its director, William J. Casey, are chastised not for their ubiquitous and nefarious activities around the world but for ineffectiveness. In this climate it was wholly

appropriate that the liberal Democratic senator, Howard M. Metzenbaum, was the one to publicly call for the assassination of Libya's Col. Moammar Kadafi following the terrorist attacks on Americans at the Rome and Vienna airports.

The Democrats' criticism of the Administration's Central American policy has become tactical rather than ideological as the unpleasant Cuban-Soviet connections of the Sandinistas are uncovered. Some of the most effective opponents of military aid to the *contras* now argue their case primarily on pragmatic, not moral, grounds. Similarly, when it comes to the President's Strategic Defense Initiative, most of the criticism from Democrats is focused on technical and cost questions rather than on the central tenet of President Reagan's policy, which is that nuclear deterrence based on mutually assured destruction is an immoral strategy that we should try to change.

One explanation for this trend is that the country is not at war, the economy is in good shape and the President has made old-fashioned patriotism popular. The new togetherness comes across in different, sometimes ironic, ways: Terrorist attacks on Americans abroad and traumas such as the shuttle disaster unite rather than polarize us. The President is seen as the symbol of this spirit, and he plays the role admirably.

The Administration has dropped its strident and negative rhetoric about the Soviet Union. This has diminished immediate fears about nuclear confrontation. Instead, it has emphasized the dual themes of democracy and free enterprise as positive values that the United States will not only advocate but also actively support in different regions of the world. These are thoroughly American objectives that the Democrats are hard put to debunk.

Whether this trend toward consensus will continue and strengthen depends on many things, but one issue is paramount:

Will the United States avoid becoming involved in protracted military conflict with ground forces in the coming years?

Despite the healing after Vietnam, there remains a raw nerve in the body politic on this matter. Our brief and tragic encounter in Lebanon and our even more brief but successful engagement in Grenada illustrate the public's sensitivity. The President had the good sense to quit Lebanon when it was clear that we had no alternatives except further military escalation. He had the good luck to win in Grenada with minimal casualties. But if hundreds of Americans had been killed, it would have been a very different story.

If the Administration avoids direct military involvement in Central America and other trouble spots, the consensus will continue. There also will be even more emphasis on democratic values that will affect our relations with authoritarian but friendly regimes such as South Korea. Successful support for nascent democratic movements would be a resounding achievement for a Republican Administration that came into office with a wink and a nod for Argentina's dictator Gen. Leopoldo F. Galtieri.

As President Richard M. Nixon's trip to China demonstrated, it takes a conservative Administration to pioneer a new and potentially contentious foreign-policy agenda. The fact that two conservative Republican senators, Paul Laxalt and Richard G. Lugar, played such a significant role in the peaceful transition in the Philippines should not go unnoticed in more extremist circles of both left and right. The center is strong. This bodes well for the country, our allies and the international community.

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